

Le eredità filosofiche di Ernst Cassirer

a cura di
Carlo Brentari - Salvatore Carannante



UNIVERSITÀ
DI TRENTO

Il pensiero di Ernst Cassirer (1874-1945) intercetta le linee di forza decisive del dibattito non solo filosofico ma anche scientifico, sociale, politico della Germania weimariana – nonché, più in generale, della cultura europea nei primi decenni del XX secolo. I saggi raccolti in questo volume ripercorrono alcuni snodi decisivi del suo pensiero e della sua ricezione: da indagini storico-filosofiche sul rapporto di Cassirer con la tradizione filosofica precedente e sul dialogo da lui instaurato con i contemporanei ad approfondimenti sul modo in cui, per l'autore, la filosofia interagisce con le altre forme di espressione dello spirito umano (la conoscenza scientifica, il mito, l'arte, la religione, la storia, il diritto). Grazie alle loro diverse prospettive, i contributi qui raccolti fanno emergere le molteplici e significative eredità che l'opera di Cassirer ha lasciato in vari campi del sapere, eredità che ne fanno a buon diritto un classico del pensiero contemporaneo.

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PAOLO PECERE

MAGICAL THINKING BETWEEN PHILOSOPHY AND POLITICS.
ERNESTO DE MARTINO READER OF ERNST CASSIRER

1.

While working on *Il mondo magico*, between 1941 and 1948, Ernesto de Martino dealt extensively with the texts of Ernst Cassirer, particularly elaborating his theses on mythical thought and planning a translation of the second volume of the *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen, Das mythische Denken* into Italian. After the publication of *Il mondo magico*, the translation project was abandoned, and no trace of that work remains.¹ In this article I will reconsider this indirect connection, attempting to reconstruct how de Martino reflected on Cassirer's texts in order to give a philosophical framework to his research on magical thought and to go beyond the limits of Benedetto Croce's philosophical perspective within which he was formed.

It has been observed that de Martino reworked Cassirer's theses,² and he certainly went beyond them: his hypothesis of

¹ A valuable framing on this long-distance dialogue can be found in C. Ginzburg, *Momigliano and de Martino*, «History and Theory. Special Issue: The Presence of the Historian: Essays in Memory of Arnaldo Momigliano», 30.4 (1991), pp. 37-48 (originally: C. Ginzburg, *Momigliano e De Martino*, «Rivista storica italiana», 2 (1988), pp. 400-413).

² C. Ginzburg, *Momigliano and De Martino*, p. 45, writes: «The thesis – which Croce sharply criticized – of the historicity of categories reelaborates,

magism as a historical age in which the crisis of ‘presence’ as a condition of spiritual life would be addressed, and that of the return of the magical in similar critical moments of the contemporary world cannot be found in *Das mythische Denken*. However, as much as those theses also draw on other authors and other experiences, they should not be separated from the reflection of these years on Cassirer. De Martino elaborated them with some passages from that text in mind, and the dialogue with Remo Cantoni, who also elaborated Cassirer’s thesis on primitive thought in an original way, seems to have constituted a decisive moment for this original development. Moreover, de Martino’s reflection on the return of myth in twentieth-century fascisms also intersected with Cassirer’s theoretical path, as I will argue in the concluding section by referring to some pages of *The Myth of the State*, the 1946 work of which de Martino also proposed the Italian translation and which he may have read before sending the text of *Il mondo magico* to print.

2.

In *Naturalismo e storicismo nell’etnologia* (1941), as is known, de Martino introduces the theme of magic within the framework of Croce’s historicism, but already in this book, despite a certain adherence to the letter of Croce’s thought, he poses questions that will lead him to question that framework. The essay on Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, whose fiction of an abstract prelogical mentality de Martino disputes, concludes with a hint of historical research yet to be done, which should have included

the attempt to determine *whether and to what extent magism can be regarded as a pedagogy of the identifying function in its practical use, whether and to what extent magism has contributed to liberating the*

in extreme form, some of Cassirer’s positions Here I propose to develop this conclusion».

secular power of the intellect, namely, that complex of intellectual tools (space, time, causality, quantity) which the cultured man handles with confidence in ordinary and scientific practice. Such a structure of the intellect appears to us today as an almost completely secularized institution, that is, removed from that halo of sacredness in which it appears immersed in the sphere of magical cultures: but what appears to us as a datum always possessed under the same conditions, has instead its own history, and such a history it would be appropriate to declare.³

This hypothesis of magism as a moment of formation of intellectual activities will be radicalized in *Il mondo magico*, where de Martino makes it an institution that was originally necessary to guarantee spiritual activity in general. Research on magism appears for now to be confined to the special case of the «primitive world», in which – in Croce’s jargon – «fantasy» and «vitality» prevail.⁴ But already the words used here suggest that this framing, which characterizes magic according to a peculiar emphasis on some categories, was precarious. By speaking of intellect as ‘given’, of the conditions of its possession, and by doing so with reference to categories that coincide with those of the Neo-Kantian tradition,⁵ de Martino was already paving the way that led beyond Crocean historicism to his new theory of the magical world.

As has been aptly noted, the conception that de Martino was maturing was indeed not reducible to Crucian orthodoxy; indeed,

³ E. De Martino, *Naturalismo e storicismo nell’etnologia*, Argo, Lecce 1997, pp. 104-105 (the original edition of this work was published in 1941 by Laterza, Bari).

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 94. Translations from Italian are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

⁵ In Cassirer’s texts, the reduction of categories to space, time, number and causality (or «functional dependence») is recurrent – though not systematic. Even in the essay that first formulates Cassirerian theses on mythical thought, with which de Martino was familiar, the analysis follows these categories (E. Cassirer, *Die Begriffsform im mythischen Denken*, Springer, Wiesbaden 1922). No such list is found in Lévy-Bruhl. A comparison between the causality of primitives, which refers to non-empirical causes, and the conception posited by Kant, which «founds for us the order of the world», referring to the network of mutual causality between phenomena, is found in L. Lévy-Bruhl, *La mentalità primitiva*, Einaudi, Torino 1975, p. 77.

it touched on a delicate point in Crocian, and, before that, Hegelian thought.⁶ According to Hegel, «weak minds» of people who «live in greater unity with nature» experience a characteristic «sympathy» with cosmic phenomena.⁷ Croce, echoing him in 1948, fresh from reading *Il mondo magico*, argued that magical abilities were «lively and strong when man, closer to animality, vibrated with a closer sympathetic relation to other beings, and in general to nature».⁸ In these pages, magic belongs to an imperfect spiritual condition, peculiar to humans still insufficiently separated from nature. The program of interpreting magism as a historical age, which de Martino was beginning to work on, evidently came into conflict with these premises: it is no coincidence that de Martino at the end of *Il mondo magico* would criticize that very Hegelian page, where Hegel considers magic «as a negative moment, as non-culture and as non-humanity», and Croce will react by reaffirming its validity against the hypothesis of magism as a historical age.⁹ Certainly magic – as de Martino wrote to Croce in 1940 – has lost its historical function «for us, children of the Renaissance of the Enlightenment and Romanticism».¹⁰ But the original point, which implicitly contained the disagreement

⁶ G. Sasso, *Ernesto de Martino. Fra religione e filosofia*, Bibliopolis, Napoli 2001, especially pp. 35-38.

⁷ G.W.F. Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse*, 1830. Dritter Teil. Die *Philosophie* des Geistes. Mit den mündlichen Zusätzen, in *Werke*, vol. 10, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main 1986, p. 54 [§ 392].

⁸ B. Croce, *Sulla conoscibilità e inconoscibilità del mondo misterioso* [1948], in B. Croce, *Filosofia e storiografia*, Laterza, Bari 1969, p. 210.

⁹ E. De Martino, *Il mondo magico*, Einaudi, Torino 2022, p. 224; B. Croce, *Intorno al magismo come età storica*, in B. Croce, *Filosofia e storiografia*, Laterza, Bari 1949, pp. 193-208, reprinted in E. De Martino, *Il mondo magico* (see here pp. 254-257).

¹⁰ «Magic» – de Martino added – «is “history as thought and as action” of the primitives», insisting that it was thought and practice worthy of historical and philosophical investigation (P. Angelini (ed.), *Dall'epistolario di Ernesto de Martino*, «Quaderni. Istituto dell'Università Orientale», 3.3/4 (n.s.) (1989), pp. 169, 170.

with Croce, lay in the fact that this *historical* function had been there, and had to be examined, without reducing magism a mere condition of weakness and conceiving of it vaguely as a condition of *proximity to nature*.

As de Martino wrote in the essay *Percezione extrasensoriale e magismo etnologico* (1943-1946) – which already contained some of the material that flowed into *Il mondo magico* – the point was to understand the historical process by which humans moved from the «ideal of the magical personality» to the «ideal of the unitary person». It should come as no surprise, then, that de Martino was already seeking other theoretical horizons to reconsider magical thought in its specificity, while he formulated plans for a series of monographs in which he would study the «crisis points» that marked the transition from magic to modern consciousness. Prominent among them is Cassirer's philosophy, who in a note to that essay is praised for the «first attempt to understand magism in the expanded self-consciousness of our civilization».¹¹

The reading of *Das mythische Denken* is already attested in a 1939 letter to Raffaele Pettazzoni, to whom de Martino wrote in the spring of 1941 that he was «corresponding with Cassirer».¹² In 1942 essay *Religionsethnologie und Historizismus*, De Martino already takes stock of his study of Cassirer, crediting the German philosopher with being «the first» to deal with magism from a historical perspective and to give «logical and historical prom-

¹¹ E. De Martino, *Percezione extrasensoriale e magismo etnologico*, «Studi e materiali di storia delle religioni», 19/20 (1943-1948), pp. 81, 82n. On the fact that de Martino's program led toward an inevitable crisis of Croceanism see G. Sasso, *Ernesto de Martino*, pp. 135ff. Sasso aptly remarks (*ibidem*, p. 148, note 53) that de Martino's interest in Cassirer's work stemmed from the attempt at a «specific understanding of the magical world» that was problematic in the Crocean framework. On the importance of the theme of the person for the Demartinian interest in Cassirer's work see G. Imbruglia, *Tra Croce e Cassirer*, in R. Di Donato (ed.), *La contraddizione felice? Ernesto de Martino e gli altri*, ETS, Pisa 1990, p. 94 (the whole article is useful).

¹² References and quotations from these letters come from C. Ginzburg, *Momigliano and de Martino*.

inence to the magical *Weltanschauung* in the context of the anti-magical polemic that has asserted itself in the course of Western civilization». ¹³ De Martino finds in Cassirer the recognition that magic, before it became an ethnological object, was a problem felt vividly in modern civilization when scientific rationality was explicitly defined by opposition to magical thought and practices. For this very reason, magic also has a ‘logical’ relevance, since it identifies a different way of thinking and acting in the world than that of the new sciences. If magic belongs to the past, it is so because a different form of thinking has prevailed in this era. The reference is to the «great advances in the physical-mathematical sciences» that have «severed the magical link between man and nature, so that for us it no longer presents itself as animated by demonic forces, but is represented within a conceptual system of events and laws». ¹⁴ These words, together with the reference to authors such as Galileo and Newton, immediately evoke the writings of Cassirer, which de Martino had extensively read by this time. ¹⁵

The interest in comparing these alternative forms of thought is certainly fuelled by the reading of *Das mythische Denken*, which sought to characterize the specificity of magical thought within a systematic framework, where it precedes scientific thought

¹³ E. De Martino, *Religionsethnologie und Historizismus*, «Paideuma», 2 (1941), p. 195n (translated in Italian by F. Frosini in E. De Martino, *Naturalismo e storicismo*, p. 288, n. 2); English translation mine.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 277.

¹⁵ After acknowledging Cassirer’s merits, de Martino lists a number of useful works for the «historian of magic» (translation mine). In addition to *Das mythische Denken*, the list includes *Die Begriffsform im mythischen Denken*, *Sprache und Mythos* and *Individuum und Kosmos in der Philosophie der Renaissance* (*ibidem*, p. 288n.). On the «anti-magical polemic» as a choice of our civilization – with reference to the early modern age – de Martino will return, after *Il mondo magico*, in the preface to the anthology *Magia e civiltà*, Garzanti, Milano 1962. The question of magic as the past, with reference to de Martino, is reprised with interesting considerations in P. Rossi, *Prefazione* to *Il tempo dei maghi*, Raffaello Cortina, Milano 2006.

while not being reduced to a crude preparation of the latter, and is rather considered an autonomous spiritual creation. The project of translating this volume for Einaudi, first announced to Cesare Pavese on December 29, 1942, continues to be mentioned several times in de Martino's epistolary throughout the years of working on *Il mondo magico*. On July 20, 1945, de Martino, in a letter to the publisher, indicates the work as «in the process of being translated». In 1948 he refers to the translation to be delivered «in two months at the latest» with an introduction. The work is mentioned until 1949, the year in which the agreement between Einaudi and Cassirer's widow will blow up (the entire *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen* will later be translated by La Nuova Italia).¹⁶ Based on available documents we are unable to determine how much de Martino had actually worked on that translation. But it is safe to assume that Cassirer's book had been on the table or, at any rate, in de Martino's theoretical workshop for a long time during the making of *Il mondo magico*.

The reception of Cassirer's thought is layered and should be analyzed on at least two levels: that of direct reading and that of the mediation carried out by philosophers to whom de Martino turned to interpret Cassirer, first and foremost Remo Cantoni.

3.

The relationship between the self and the world is the central theme that, through the reading of Cassirer's texts, de Martino develops up to *Il mondo magico*. To analyze it, we can begin with a passage from the 1942 *Lineamenti di etnometapsichica*, where de Martino comments on the non-substantialist conception of the ego formulated by Kant, arguing that with this «opened up

¹⁶ For the quoted letters see C. Pavese - E. De Martino, *La collana viola. Lettere 1945-1950*, ed. by P. Angelini, Bollati Boringhieri, Milano 2022, pp. 76, 89, 152, 160. Cfr. pp. 180-181.

the possibility of considering the individual-cosmos relation as dynamic and functional» and the powers of the subject over the object «as historically evolving». De Martino added: «undoubtedly Kant was not fully aware of his discovery». He went on to say that Hegel made important advances on the subject-object relation and finally that Cassirer affirmed «the idea of the functional subject-object relation».¹⁷

This was indeed a rather loose interpretation of Kant, which could find some support in Kant's critique of the notion of the soul and his conception of the self as a synthetic unity, but – although de Martino had first-hand knowledge of the *Critique of Pure Reason* – it was certainly prompted by other sources. These undoubtedly include Cassirer, as indicated, even before the direct reference, by the use of the substance-function dichotomy, which runs through all Cassirer's writings. De Martino's words on the individual-cosmos relationship echo, for example, remind of a page from *Individuum und Kosmos in der Philosophie der Renaissance* (a work de Martino had read).¹⁸ On the theoretical level, de Martino's page connects especially with several passages in *Das mytische Denken* and the philosophy of symbolic forms. At the beginning of the chapter on *The Ego and the Soul*, Cassirer challenges the conception that ego and soul are the fundamental principle of mythical thought, supported by Tylor with his theory of animism. The function that establishes the relationship between ego and reality, for Cassirer, is precisely the symbolic form:

¹⁷ E. De Martino, *Lineamenti di etnometapsichica*, in Aa.Vv., *Problemi di etnometapsichica*, Società Italiana di Metapsichica, Roma 1942, p. 137.

¹⁸ E. Cassirer, *The individual and the cosmos in Renaissance philosophy*, Harper & Row, New York 1963, p. 142: «'body' and 'soul', 'nature' and 'spirit' are no longer related substantively, as one thing to another, but rather *functionally*». Renaissance thought, according to Cassirer, would be set on this path by «exact and empirical research» and «art theory». Cassirer was here deepening the conception of historical-epistemological progress already elaborated in earlier works, which has its key moment in Kant. Cassirer's work is cited in E. De Martino, *Religionsethnologie und Historizismus*, p. 288, n. 30.

For a glance at the development of the various symbolic forms shows us that their essential achievement is not that they copy the outward world in the inward world or that they simply project a finished inner world outward, but rather that the two factors of “inside” and “outside,” of “I” and “reality” are *determined* and delimited from one another only in these symbolic forms and through their mediation.¹⁹

This mutual determination does not take place once and for all, but is a dynamic process, in which the boundary between self and reality arises «differently» each time. From this perspective, the substantialist conception of the soul as a «given possession» – typical of metaphysics – is absent in mythical thought:

For myth the concept of the soul is no stereotype into which it forces everything that comes within its grasp but is rather a fluid, plastic element which changes in its hands. Whereas *metaphysics* and “rational psychology” treat the concept of the soul as a given possession, taking it as a substance with definite immutable attributes, the mythical consciousness operates in an exactly opposite way.²⁰

The progress introduced by Hegel with respect to the subject-object relation is also suggested in the pages of *Das mythische Denken*. Examining the evolution of the practical relationship between subject and world, Cassirer argues that the ego finds its form *by acting* on objects:

The import of man’s action on the outside world is not simply that the I, as a finished thing, as a self-contained “substance,” draws outside things into its sphere and takes possession of them. Rather, all true action is *formative* in a twofold sense: the I does not simply impress its own form, a form given to it from the very outset, upon objects; on the contrary, it acquires this form only in the totality of the actions which it exerts upon objects and which it receives back from them. Accordingly, the limits of the inner world can only be determined, its ideal formation can only become *visible*, if the sphere of being is circumscribed in action.²¹

¹⁹ E. Cassirer, *The philosophy of symbolic forms. Volume 2. Mythical thought*, Yale University Press, New Haven - London 1955, pp. 155-156.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 156.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 200.

This reciprocal determination of interiority and things that occurs with action also applies in magical thinking. To clarify this point, the German philosopher quotes and examines a passage by Hegel, who had already addressed the question from magical acting by comparing it to that of «civilized» man. According to Hegel, the action of civilized man implies a distancing, a «withdrawal» from natural things and other individuals. Only in this way is man «free» and can act indirectly through technique. By contrast, in magic – as we saw above – the human subject has not yet freed himself from nature, does not contemplate the world as distinct and autonomous from himself, and therefore magic is an «unmediated power» directed by natural inclinations and desire.²² Cassirer objects:

But this standing off of man from objects, which forms the presupposition of his own inner freedom, does not take place only in the ‘educated’, purely theoretical consciousness; the first germinal beginning of it is disclosed even in the mythical world view. For as soon as man seeks to influence things not by mere image magic or name magic but through implements, he has undergone an inner crisis – even if, for the present, this influence still operates through the customary channels of magic.²³

When thinking about the historical dynamic of the relationship between self and world, citing the contributions of Hegel and Cassirer, de Martino was certainly thinking about this exchange. He derives from it, first, that magical thinking is not a stage in which spirit is reduced to nature, but is instead already

²² Magic is «a *direct* power over nature in general and not comparable with the indirect power which we exert through tools on natural objects in particular. The power which the educated man exerts on particular natural things presupposes that he has stepped back from this world, that the world has acquired outwardness with respect to him, to which outwardness he accords an independence and qualitative determinations and laws of its own, that these things are relative to one another in their qualitative determinacy and stand to one another in diverse relationships [...] For this it is necessary that man be free in himself» (G.W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion*, II. Sec. 1: *Die Naturreligion*, quoted in Cassirer, *Mythical thought*, p. 214).

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 214.

fully formative of a world, with theory and praxis. The fact that Cassirer characterizes this passage as a «spiritual rupture», a «crisis», does not yet imply that it is a dramatic process, with an uncertain outcome; but it is safe to assume that de Martino reflected on these words by reading into them his view of the crisis of presence as a 'risk' of not being there.

Cassirer's legacy, based on what we have seen so far, lay in the valorisation of the magical as an autonomous form of thought that prepares subsequent forms of thought. The idea of a reality in itself is resolved into a multiplicity of distinct realities, depending on the ways in which consciousness processes the world. This philosophical perspective made it possible to formulate the question about the reality of magical powers without questioning the validity of modern rationality with respect to a transcendent sacred, as in the irrationalism that de Martino deprecated. However, the transition from magical thinking to modern rationality still remained to be clarified. To this end, it does not seem that de Martino ever considered the dialectical reasoning (in Hegelian style) that Cassirer had used to clarify the logical succession among its symbolic forms. For that matter, Cassirer, by emphasizing the *form of mythical thought* rather than magic in its psychological and ritual implications, remained far removed from the interest in individual and collective dramas that de Martino was deepening with his psychoanalytic and ethnological readings. On the theoretical level, in general, de Martino could not content himself with Cassirer's peacefully progressive vision, where the conflicts and aporias of history, despite regressive and pathological moments, always resolve themselves into a transition to forms of mastery of the real.

In the philosophy of symbolic forms, in particular, two decisive and closely related theses of *Il mondo magico* were missing altogether: that of the magical as the original condition of all categorical activity, which guarantees the self in the face of the risk of not being there and returning to nature, which marked the explicit departure from Croce (and also, implicitly, from Cassirer); and that of the return of the magical in the modern world. Both

theses begin to be outlined in the exchange with Remo Cantoni, which thus constitutes a crucial step in understanding the original Demartinian elaboration of Cassirer's legacy.

4.

De Martino came in touch with Antonio Banfi in 1941, when he had already read Cassirer, and in the only remaining letter of their correspondence, dated February 12, he complained, as an ethnologist, about the limits of the «four forms» of the life of the spirit as defined by Croce. In Spring he wrote to Pettazzoni: «for the knowledge of modern German thought I am availing myself of the advice of Banfi and the group of scholars gathered around the journal *Studi filosofici*».²⁴ He then began to collaborate with «*Studi filosofici*», where in 1942 he reviewed *Il pensiero dei primitivi* by Remo Cantoni, a student of Banfi, and had an important exchange with the latter.

The circumstance that triggered this relationship was Cantoni's review of *Naturalismo e storicismo* and the latter's positive (if critical) approach to Croce's thought, communicated to de Martino in a January 28 letter.²⁵ This contact with Banfi and Cantoni, two thinkers who challenged the hegemony of Croce's philosophy, undoubtedly marks a decisive moment for the philosophical interpretation of the magical that de Martino had begun to develop by reading Cassirer. But it is not immediately clear what de Martino was looking for in this resort to Banfi's school in Milan, nor what he found there. Certainly, a theoretical horizon that would allow him to modify the Crocean framework that had already shown its resistance to including the project on magism. Cassirer was part of

²⁴ The passage is immediately following the one quoted above in which de Martino writes about being in correspondence with Cassirer.

²⁵ *Dall'epistolario di Ernesto de Martino*, ed. by P. Angelini, «Quaderni», Istituto Universitario Orientale, III, 1989, n.s. 3/4, p. 174.

this horizon, without exhausting it: referring to «modern German thought», de Martino could also think of other authors. Banfi had studied Kant extensively with Alois Riehl and had also studied the thought of Georg Simmel, reflecting on the formation of the person through a practical relationship with the world.²⁶ In *La filosofia e la vita spirituale* (1922), after discussing Kant and Simmel among others, Banfi presented a transcendental conception of the person according to which «the unity of the person [...] is nothing given, nothing presupposed to the activity of his spirit, but is the ideality of his self-consciousness, overriding all dispersions and all conflicts realized in the continuity of his life».²⁷ Banfi would develop these thoughts in the manuscript *La persona* (drafted in the very years of de Martino's collaboration with «Studi filosofici»), where the person is a «dynamic principle», never reducible to the substantialist views of spiritualism and naturalism.²⁸

Despite the similarities with his formulations cited above, there is no evidence that de Martino at the time was familiar with these theses of Banfi, who in any case did not connect the theoretical problem of the person with a particular historical condition. But Banfi's discussions of existentialism would leave traces in his student Remo Cantoni's research on the «primitive men». In the second edition of the book, Cantoni acknowledged that he and de Martino – who had been working in parallel on *Naturalismo e storicismo* – converged in a revival of interest in «the 'primitive' or 'magical' world».²⁹

²⁶ For a framework see L. Eletti, *Il problema della persona in Antonio Banfi*, La Nuova Italia, Firenze 1985.

²⁷ A. Banfi, *La filosofia e la vita spirituale*, Editori Riuniti, Roma 1967, p. 123.

²⁸ A. Banfi, *La persona. Il problema e la sua attualità*, Quattroventi, Urbino 1980, in part p. 44 («dynamic principle»). See p. 49, where Banfi contrasts the «complex dynamism of the living» with its alleged «substantial staticity», referring to the conceptions of James, Klages and Bergson (translation mine). For the dating of the manuscript see pp. 8-10.

²⁹ R. Cantoni, *Il pensiero dei primitivi*, Bollati Boringhieri, Milano 1963, p. 13.

In his book, Cantoni accepted Lévy-Bruhl's theory of the magical as participationist thinking, and in his review of *Naturalismo e storicismo* he made some criticism of de Martino's philosophical perspective. The latter would have been wrong to reject Lévy-Bruhl's prelogism on the grounds that the ethnologist would have considered primitive mentality as irreducible to our own.³⁰ On the contrary, the definition of a prelogical mentality did not exclude «the survival, in wide spheres of our culture, of primitive mysticism». Another objection concerned the refusal to historicize categories, which for Cantoni is correct in the abstract, but since «ideal categories are limiting visions that in their abstract purity are never historically realized», does not exclude that in concrete terms primitive cultures constitute a special case in which «ideal categories all lie still immersed in a mythical or magical halo, as Cassirer saw. They therefore although present, are still budding and undifferentiated».³¹ Cantoni concluded by emphasizing the limits of Croce's philosophy with a good-natured provocation: «Are we easy prophets if we say to the A. that historicist idealism will serve him only if he knows how to go beyond it?».³²

De Martino replied by emphasizing his interest in paranormal phenomena and the related problem of the reality of the magical powers observed by ethnographers; but he reiterated that such reality is peculiar to a historical epoch, «the magical age», for which magic has a character «not categorical, but historical»,

³⁰ Moreover, as is well known, Lévy-Bruhl himself would recognize this continuity in his 1938 notebooks, published in 1949, which de Martino himself later edited for the *Collana viola* (L. Lévy-Bruhl, *Quaderni*, Einaudi, Torino 1952, pp. 160-161).

³¹ The review, which appeared in the first issue of «Studi filosofici» (1940-1941), can now be read in *Naturalismo e storicismo*, pp. 307-308 (I draw the next quotations of the exchange with de Martino from here. See the remarks of S. De Matteis, *ibidem*, pp. 244-251).

³² *Ibidem*, p. 311.

which «is no longer a value for modern men».³³ Cantoni was therefore wrong to equate the magic of primitive peoples with cases such as «Renaissance magism» or «Novalis's magical idealism».³⁴ This indiscriminate extension depended on characterizing magic as one among human «spiritual functions».³⁵ The criticism also seemed applicable to Cassirer's theory, which de Martino identified as a model for Cantoni's, thus emphasizing its abstractness from a historicist point of view.³⁶

Cantoni responded to de Martino's review by rejecting his thesis of the metapsychic as the key to interpreting the magical world, since ethnographic evidence rather proved that «in the vast majority of cases [...] the sorcerer's powers, like the supernatural participations and interventions in which the primitives believe, are purely subjective phenomena without feedback *in re*».³⁷ He also rejected the dichotomy between historical and categorical «forms of culture», asserting that different «historical conditions» do not exclude the fact that earlier cultures – the primitive world, the Renaissance world, and so on – contain «living and well-present elements of our consciousness», and that the past world can be spiritually retraced by «making it current in our minds».³⁸ With respect to «primitive thinking», this possibility depends on the fact that «the circle of positive and critical intelligence is shrouded in a halo of emotional and mystical thought that continually intervenes, with alternating events, in our experience. Who does not speak of *chance*, of *destiny*, of *providence*? Who does not continually feel the boundary that separates the self from things shifting?».³⁹

³³ *Ibidem*, pp. 321, 322 (de Martino's review was in volume II of «Studi filosofici», 1942-1944).

³⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 321.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 322.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 314, cfr. p. 312.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 324.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 326, 327, 328.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 329.

With respect to the anti-magical controversy, Cantoni agreed with the task of recognizing its value for «our culture of Westerners», but warned that we must also «place in its proper place that mythic consciousness which is a deep need of our spirituality», pointing out that with respect to the «restless world of desire, dream, unconscious, emotion [...] the exorcism» of rationality «is not, nor can it ever be, complete».⁴⁰ Cantoni was using notions taken from Cassirer – «primitive», or «magical» thought included in the form of «mythical thought»⁴¹ the dynamic relationship between self and things – giving them an emotional bent inspired by, among others, Freud. From this perspective, he concluded, «there remains the problem of a history of categories», which in the case of the primitive are not yet as distinct as they are for ‘us’, and he invited de Martino to recognize that mythical thought is «a moment in the phenomenology of spirit» and therefore has «categorical as well as historical character».⁴²

De Martino replied again in the *Appendix to Il mondo magico*, defending the empirical evidence for spiritualism, and reiterating that his and Cantoni’s perspectives were different: where Cantoni wanted to define a «type of primitive or mythical mentality», he wanted to understand historically «its characterizing drama».⁴³ Yet, Cantoni’s writings seem to have impacted on the research that culminated in *Il mondo magico* and in particular on how to interpret magical thinking in a historical sense. Already in his 1942 review in «Studi filosofici», de Martino had acknowledged that Cantoni was inspired by the consideration of «a drama that is us and around us», the «polarity between reason and life, intelligence and intuition».⁴⁴ In that present drama, Cantoni had made out the return of the magical, the outcome of its

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 331.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 330, 333.

⁴² *Ibidem*, pp. 332-333.

⁴³ *Ibidem*, p. 336.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 313.

unconcluded (and never to be concluded) rational «exorcism», as de Martino would also later do. Moreover, Cantoni also understood that this problem inevitably challenged the framework of Croce's categories, suggesting their historicity. The «rationality fused in an affective crucible», which Cantoni had attributed to magical thinking, persisted, moreover, in modern thought – a theme that Cantoni would explore in his later work on Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky, addressing different philosophical models than that of German idealism.⁴⁵

It can be concluded that the notion of presence, which de Martino matured through reading authors such as Janet, Freud and Heidegger, as well as through direct experience of the crisis of European society and the War, also responded to a philosophical problem that de Martino found formulated by Cantoni, and in particular in the latter's peculiar historical and existential interpretation of Cassirer's «mythical thought». But in *Il mondo magico*, as the choice of the title signals, it was not just a matter of thought and myth. The point was to investigate a dimension of the relationship with the world that was not only intellectual and affective but also practical, in which the person, exposed to a radical crisis, found in rituals and sorcerers a necessary support: a theme that in Cantoni's and Cassirer's texts, vitiated by an «Olympian» detachment from the experience of the magical, was not to be found, and that was crucial for de Martino.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ The quoted words are in R. Cantoni, *Il pensiero dei primitivi*, p. 196.

⁴⁶ The adjective «olympische» was used to characterize Cassirer's appearance and attitude by a witness to the famous debate with Heidegger that took place in Davos in 1929 (G. Schneeberger, *Nachlese zu Heidegger*, Selbstverlag, Bern 1962, p. 1), and Heidegger himself, in a letter to Karl Löwith dated Sept. 3, 1929, complained about the «olympian and presumptuous all-encompassing objectivity [*olympische und aufgeplusterte Allerweltobjektivität*]» (translation mine), praising the younger students in attendance (perhaps drawing the adjective from their voices). De Martino used the word to characterize Cantoni. The coincidence is intriguing and deserves to be further explored.

5.

In one of the philosophically crucial passages of *Il mondo magico*, as is known, de Martino argues that the transcendental unity of apperception was mistakenly assumed by Kant as an «non-historic and uniform datum», as a «transcendental condition», whereas it is a condition subject to risk in its historical becoming.⁴⁷ A similar error lay in the philosophy of «existentialism» – the reference was to Heidegger – which took being as a given, whereas it is «a cultural good», originally conquered in the magical world.⁴⁸ De Martino's interpretation of Kant missed the distinction posed by the latter between the pure ego, the necessary and universal condition of experience, and the empirical ego, which under certain conditions can fail to realize that condition.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, de Martino's interpretation was motivated by ethnographic and psychological evidence on certain conditions of ego lability. In a footnote, de Martino specified that those conditions were also historical: «In a situation of particular suffering and deprivation, in the course of a war, famine, etc., the being may fail to resist the exceptional tension, and may thus again open itself to the magical existential drama».⁵⁰

The philosophical framework for this assertion was the same as that guiding the above-mentioned considerations on Kant and Heidegger, as emerges from de Martino's words: «a decided and

⁴⁷ E. De Martino, *Il mondo magico*, p. 161.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 164.

⁴⁹ De Martino's error consisted in his failure to distinguish between the pure ego and the empirical ego, which Kant mentions in the *Critique of Pure Reason* and elaborates particularly in the *Anthropology*. The pure ego, or 'logical ego', is a universal and necessary condition of the use of the intellect and thus of experience, which the individual ego realizes; but this did not exclude that, under certain empirical conditions, the ego is absent: either because it has not yet developed, or because it collapses due to drug taking, strong emotions, and mental illness. On the two notions of the I in Kant see P. Pecere, *Soul, mind and brain from Descartes to cognitive science*, Springer, Cham 2020, pp. 76-77.

⁵⁰ E. De Martino, *Il mondo magico*, p. 131n.

guaranteed presence is a historical good and as such, under certain conditions, revocable».⁵¹ In these pages, the conception that had always produced an irreconcilable tension between de Martino's thought and that of the philosophers to whom he mainly referred (from Kant to Hegel, Croce, Cassirer and Heidegger) came to the fore: presence is not only marked by fragility and anguish, but under certain circumstances it may just fail, and no degree of civil progress guarantees that this will no longer happen. Consequently, it is the world itself, correlated with presence, that does not constitute an ontological existential structure, intangible with respect to any historical occurrence – a point to which de Martino will return in his unfinished project on *La fine del mondo*.

Returning to Cassirer's pages, de Martino could find there only a few hints of this apocalyptic vision. Cassirer acknowledged that «in myth – and not only in its elementary forms but often in relatively advanced configurations—the motif of the soul's division far overbalances that of its unity».⁵² This recognition, ethnographically grounded, was taken up in *Il mondo magico*;⁵³ but what for Cassirer was a purely formal motif of mythical thought took on a bent in de Martino that radically altered its meaning: psychic multiplicity – more so than the inner multiplicity of the psyche of Freudian metapsychology – was rather that of Janet, of multiple personalities, in short, of conditions in which the unity of synthesis was entirely lacking and the subject could lose its grip on the world altogether.⁵⁴ This psychic dimension – which de Martino also considered on the basis of his own experience of the «epileptic aura»⁵⁵ – was then also declined on the historical level, in a way again divergent from Cassirer. That is why in the latter's

⁵¹ *Ibidem*.

⁵² E. Cassirer, *Mythical thought*, p. 163.

⁵³ E. De Martino, *Il mondo magico*, pp. 222-23, 184-185.

⁵⁴ Janet is mentioned on the quoted page on Kant and presence (*ibidem*, p. 162n.).

⁵⁵ See the document in G. Charuty, *Ernesto de Martino. Le precedenti vite di un antropologo*, FrancoAngeli, Milano 2010, p. 57.

philosophy the succession of myth, religion and science is still, however tortuous, progressive, according to a Hegelian-inspired conception that did not seem to be contrasted by the historical circumstances in which Cassirer in 1924 had released his book.⁵⁶

De Martino himself, however, would take up the mention of «particular situations» in history contained in *Il mondo magico* recalling the years of his ethnological vocation in a tremendous and memorable page of the essay *Etnologia e cultura nazionale negli ultimi dieci anni* in 1953, later reworked in the essay *Promesse e minacce dell'etnologia* included in the 1962 book *Furore simbolo valore*:

Those were the years when Hitler was shamanising in Germany and Europe, and still far away was the day when the ruins of the Chancellery Palace would compose for this heinous European shaman the fiery coffin in which he attempted to bury mankind.⁵⁷

The investigation of magism and shamanism, de Martino clarified here, did not stem from a nostalgia for «atavistic experiences», like that of so much contemporary irrationalism, but from the need to come to terms with those dark energies of the unconscious toward which «the exorcism of traditional reason had failed», with the hope that a new ethnology, conceived as the conquest of a broader and more effective reason, might contribute to «renewing the failed exorcism».⁵⁸ The model for this hypothesis of a new rational exorcism had been psychoanalysis. This reference also points to the possible source of the picture of Hitler as ‘shaman’.

During these years, de Martino was reading Freud and Jung intensively. The latter noted, in tones quite different from those

⁵⁶ E. Cassirer, *Mythical thought*, pp. 23-26. See G. Imbruglia, *Fra Croce e Cassirer*, pp. 95-96 and S. Barbera, ‘Presenza’ e ‘mondo’. *Modelli filosofici nell'opera di Ernesto de Martino*, in *La contraddizione felice?*, pp. 116-117.

⁵⁷ E. De Martino, *Promesse e minacce dell'etnologia*, in Id., *Furore simbolo valore*, Feltrinelli, Milano 2002, pp. 85-86. The original article was published in «Società», 9.3 (1953), pp. 313-342.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 86.

recurring in Cassirer, the presence of atavistic dynamics in the modern psyche and expressed as early as 1928 a strong concern for the future of Europe, fearing a new war and maintaining that «modern man has suffered an almost fatal shock, psychologically speaking, and as a result has fallen into profound uncertainty».⁵⁹ Three years later, the Nazi party increased its support tenfold. With Hitler's rise to power, Jung also turned his analysis to dictators. This is the context of an interview, published in 1938, in which Jung declares that Hitler «falls into the class of the medicine man, the mystic, the seer». Indeed, he had the «uncanny power of being sensitive to [...] collective unconscious. It is as if he knows what the nation is really feeling at any given time», making its resentment his own. In doing so, Hitler «sacrificed his individuality, or else does not possess one in any real sense, to this almost complete subordination to collective unconscious forces».⁶⁰ Jung also instituted an analogy with the Jewish-Christian savior figure: «Just as the Jews of old looked for a Messiah who would deliver them, so the Germans have looked for their savior, and in Hitler they believe they have found him».⁶¹ In 1941, his student Helton Godwin Baynes took up the comparison, developing it into an entire work, *Germany Possessed*, where he established an analogy between Hitler's personality and behavior and that of Siberian shamans, whereby the shaman is configured as an individual who embodies the psychic lability of individuals in a community to overcome crisis for the benefit of all.⁶²

⁵⁹ C.G. Jung, *The spiritual problem of modern man*, in *Civilization in transition. Collected works*, vol. 10, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ 1964, pp. 77-78. De Martino was familiar with this volume, cited (from the Italian translation, published in 1942 by Einaudi, Torino) in *Il mondo magico*, p. 140.

⁶⁰ *Jung diagnoses dictators*, in *C.G. Jung speaking. Interviews and encounters*, Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ 1977, pp. 137-139. For the history of this text see *ibidem*, p. 136.

⁶¹ *Ibidem*, p. 138.

⁶² H.G. Baynes, *Germany Possessed*, Routledge, Abingdon 2016, pp. 35ff. Cfr. p. 62, where Baynes states that his hypothesis is inspired by reading Jung's

It is unclear whether de Martino had read these juxtapositions while working on *Il mondo magico*. He was certainly familiar with its elements: the ethnographic literature on shamans, Jungian psychoanalysis, and the dramatic awareness of Nazism. This may perhaps explain the similarity between those pages and his words about the «shaman», or «sorcerer», as a «magical Christ», capable of «reading the [...] existential drama» of other presences and «influencing their course».

He who has taken away the *limit of* his own object can also go beyond this limit. This means that through the sorcerer's redemption, the whole community is opened to redemption, can access "salvation." In this sense, the sorcerer is configured as a true magical Christ, a mediator for the whole community of the beingness of the world as redemption from the risk of not being there.⁶³

In this famous passage the above elements seem to connect, although there is no reference to historical actuality. But Croce, a very close reader, already grasped this, declaring his discomfort with the salvific function attributed by de Martino to the sorcerer in years characterized by the «drama and tendency to submerge oneself in the irrational and to alienate one's freedom», and commenting that sorcerers had just been «experienced [...] in the form of dictators and undifferentiated and totalitarian states». The fact that de Martino placed the sorcerer at the head of history and civilization, Croce concluded, «gives me some thoughts».⁶⁴

Returning to the 1953 essay, another reference could be Mircea Eliade, whose monumental *Le Chamanisme et les techniques archaïques de l'extase* had recently appeared (1951). Here the shaman is characterized as a «primary phenomenon», that is, an «ecstatic experience» that would not be restricted to an epoch

essay on the figure of Wotan (where, however, there is no mention of shamans, and the point at stake is the return of Germanic paganism).

⁶³ E. De Martino, *Il mondo magico*, p. 99.

⁶⁴ B. Croce, *Intorno al magismo come età storica*, in *Il mondo magico*, p. 257.

but «fundamental in the human condition», and would be performed «in defense of the psychic integrity of the community».⁶⁵ After all, Eliade had already argued, in a review of *Il mondo magico*, that the magical world was not only the primitive world, but also «another world accessible, in principle, to everyone and at any historical moment», such as that of mediums and yogic adepts.⁶⁶ In *Promesse e minacce dell'etnologia*, de Martino identified in the «irrationalism» and «anti-historicism» of scholars of the «primitive» such as Eliade a tendency to «re-actualize in all seriousness this value in our civilization [...] even on the level of political realization», likening this perspective to that of Nazi scholar J.W. Hauer, and finally, therefore, to «Nazism with its program of subjugation and beastification of the world».⁶⁷ Eliade is another example of how de Martino tended to confront the work of scholars where the study of myth and religion was charged with topical and even political concerns.

All this seems to lead away from Cassirer. But things appear differently if one also considers Cassirer's last book, *The Myth of the State*, where the investigation of the idea of the state and its attached mythology proceeded from ancient philosophy to contemporary totalitarian states. The volume was published posthumously in 1946. De Martino proposed its translation to Pavese on October 9, 1948, while noting the risk of a reactionary interpretation due to the «Nazism=fascism=communism=totalitarianism» equivalence that recurred in the text. This must be why de Martino proposed different titles to Pavese: «*Mythical Mentality and Fascism*, or *Magical World and Fascism*, or *Sorcerers and Leaders [Stregoni e duci]*».⁶⁸

⁶⁵ M. Eliade, *Shamanism. Archaic techniques of ecstasy*, Arkana, London 1984, pp. 504, 509.

⁶⁶ M. Eliade, *Scienza, idealismo e fenomeni paranormali*, in E. De Martino, *Il mondo magico*, pp. 275-276.

⁶⁷ E. De Martino, *Promesse e minacce dell'etnologia*, pp. 97-102, translation mine. On the young Eliade's closeness to fascist traditionalism, see F. Jesi, *Cultura di destra*, Nottetempo, Milano 2011, pp. 64ff.

⁶⁸ *La collana viola*, p. 141.

Stregoni e duci: the juxtaposition strikes the reader of *Il mondo magico* and the other writings mentioned above. De Martino read *The Myth of the State* over a period from its publication in 1946 to 1948. As has been noted, it is not excluded that he could have made use of it in the last stage of revision of the manuscript of *Il mondo magico*.⁶⁹ In any case, the idea of a fascist and Nazi myth was already well known and discussed, beginning with the writings of Alfred Rosenberg and Mussolini.⁷⁰ Adolfo Omodeo, in a review had blamed the «cult of the primitive», and the «myth» of the «titanic demiurgy» of the lord prevailing over the weak.⁷¹ De Martino had referred back to this writing by Omodeo in the Introduction to *Naturalismo e storicismo*, immediately following the page in which he states that «our civilization is in crisis» and that the study of «the so-called primitive world» also helps the understanding of «certain very recent forms of politico-religious praxis, certain strange dispositions of mind, certain appeals to ineffable experiences (think of the Gemüt that clutches soil and race, race and blood, in a sentimental unity)». ⁷² Reflections on theories of race and totalitarianism as contemporary examples of the lability of presence are also found in later manuscripts.⁷³ But

⁶⁹ C. Ginzburg, *Momigliano and De Martino*, p. 408: «We cannot exclude the possibility, however, that the manuscript saved by De Martino's wife from the ruins of Cotignola (as we can read in the dedication of *Il mondo magico*) had been revised before it was sent to Pavese in August 1946, and perhaps even during the two years between then and when the work was publication». See, for a similar point, G. Sasso, *Ernesto de Martino*, p. 43n.

⁷⁰ Another reference to «resurrected primitive sentiments» and «blood cult» was found in a 1941 essay by Lucien Febvre, *Sensibility and History: How to Reconstitute the Affective Life of the Past* (see C. Ginzburg, *Mitologia germanica e nazismo*, in *Miti emblemi spie*, Adelphi, Milano 2023, p. 221). Examples could easily multiply.

⁷¹ A. Omodeo, Review of A. Möser, *Deutsche Staatskunst und Nationalerziehung*, «La Critica», 38 (1940), pp. 232, 234.

⁷² E. De Martino, *Naturalismo e storicismo*, pp. 57-58.

⁷³ *Ernesto de Martino Archives*, file 3.61. These documents, which I have not been able to consult, are mentioned by G. Satta, *Le fonti etnografiche del mondo magico*, in E. De Martino, *Il mondo magico*, p. 303n. It would be in-

in general, the interest in political myth runs through all of De Martino's work, from his early writings⁷⁴ to his writings on the Marxist and socialist myth.⁷⁵

In any case, several pages of that posthumous and imperfect book by Cassirer, in which the philosopher finally disturbed the serenity of his philosophical-historical prose to acknowledge the historical drama of Nazism, which had also affected him as a Jew, recall thoughts and formulations from *Il mondo magico* and later writings:

In desperate situations man will always have to resort to desperate means-and such desperate means have been the political myths of our present.⁷⁶

The modern politician [...] is the priest of a new religion, completely irrational and mysterious.⁷⁷

In a totalitarian state [...] man's entire life is suddenly inundated with a flood of new rituals.⁷⁸

teresting to explore the possible connections between these historical-political themes and the ethnography of Sergei Shirokogoroff, whose 1935 book *The Psychomental Complex of the Tungus* was fundamental to the elaboration of the figure of the shaman in the second chapter of *The Magic World*. For a brief outline of the positions of Shirokogoroff, who was hostile to the Bolsheviks and established collaborative ties with anthropologists in Nazi Germany, see D. Arzyutov, *Order Out of Chaos: Anthropology and Politics of Sergei M. Shirokogoroff*, in D. Anderson - D. Arzyutov - S. Alymov (eds.), *Life Histories of Ethnos Theory in Russia and Beyond*, Open Book Publishers, Cambridge 2019; DOI: <<https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0150.06>>.

⁷⁴ For example, *Il concetto di religione* (1933) and *Il dramma tra individuo e Stato nella politica platonica* (1934), which can be read in E. De Martino, *Scritti minori su religione, marxismo e psicoanalisi*, Nuove edizioni romane, Roma 1993.

⁷⁵ For example, *Il mito marxista* (1948), *ibidem*, pp. 119-121. But this theme is still central in *Furore simbolo valore* and in de Martino's last manuscripts.

⁷⁶ E. Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*, Yale University Press, New Haven 1946, p. 279.

⁷⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 282.

⁷⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 284.

Reading these passages, one thinks back to the situation of 'exceptional' tension in which the individual is reopened to the existential magical drama; to the magician, or shaman, who catalyzes and resolves on the mythic-ritual level the crisis of individuals; and finally – and this is the only missing element, but as we have seen implied, in *Il mondo magico* – the realization that that crisis and function can return in new forms in the myths and rituals of the modern world.

In Cassirer's book, de Martino could have recognized issues that he chose not to make explicit in the text of *Il mondo magico*, only to take them up later. It was, after all, a work that was born with another objective, that of investigating magism as a historical age and condition in which magic had its own reality. But soon those questions appeared to be endowed with a new urgency: ethnology would be presented as a means of practicing an exorcism of the irrational, linked also to a political project of emancipating the masses of the South that for some years de Martino linked to socialism. Later, in the pages of *La fine del mondo*, de Martino returned to the theme of crisis by returning to the philosophical elements of his thought, and formulated the idea of an «*ethos* of transcendence» as a non-ontologically guaranteed foundation of presence and thus of freedom. Then he could have subscribed to the words that Cassirer, abandoning his Olympian reassuring register, had written in his posthumous book: «Freedom is not a given, but a demand; an ethical imperative».⁷⁹

⁷⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 288.